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ABSTRACT

This study explored how some aspects of achievement goals theory can be integrated into the education of gifted and/or academically talented students. Specifically, the study addressed whether teachers of gifted students utilized task-focused instructional practices more often than performance-focused instructional practices, whether teachers of gifted students perceived differential achievement goal pursuit between high achieving and low achieving gifted students, and whether teachers of gifted students perceived within-group differences in goal pursuit for both high achieving and low achieving gifted students. Forty-nine teachers of gifted elementary students completed the "Approaches to Teaching and Learning" scale from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey and a modified version of the "Personal Goals Orientation" student scale. Results indicated that teachers of gifted students reported significantly more use of task-focused instruction compared to performance-focused instruction. Teachers perceived high achieving gifted students to pursue task and performance-approach goals significantly more often than low achieving gifted students. High achieving gifted students were also perceived to pursue task and performance-approach achievement goals significantly more often compared to their pursuit of performance-avoidance goals. No relative difference in achievement goal pursuit was perceived for low achieving gifted students. (Contains 41 references.) (Author/CR)

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Achievement Goal Orientation: Instructional Practices and Teacher Perceptions of Gifted and/or Academically Talented Students

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to explore how some aspects of achievement goal theory can be integrated into the education of gifted and/or academically talented (G/AT) students. Specifically, the present work addresses three main questions: (a) Do teachers of G/AT students utilize task-focused instructional practices more often than performance-focused instructional practices?, (b) Do teachers of G/AT students perceive differential achievement goal pursuit (i.e., task, performance-approach, performance-avoidance) between "high achieving" and "low achieving" G/AT students?, and (c) Do teachers of G/AT students perceive within-group differences in goal pursuit for both "high achieving" and "low achieving" G/AT students. Forty-nine teachers of G/AT students completed the PALS (Midgley et al., 1997) "Approaches to Teaching and Learning" scale and modified version of the "Personal Goal Orientation" student scale. Results indicated that teachers of G/AT students reported significantly more use of task-focused instruction compared to performance-focused instruction. Teachers perceived "high achieving" G/AT students to pursue task and performance-approach goals significantly more often than "low achieving" G/AT students. "High-achieving" G/AT students were also perceived to pursue task and performance-approach achievement goals significantly more often compared to their pursuit of performance-avoidance goals. No relative difference in achievement goal pursuit was perceived for "low achieving" G/AT students.

Achievement Goal Orientation: Instructional Practices and Teacher Perceptions of Gifted and/or Academically Talented Students

Many theories have been developed which attempt to explain the complex nature of achievement motivation (see Eccles, Wigfield, & Schieffele, 1998 for review). Achievement motivation may be defined as the energization and direction of competence-based affect, cognition, and behavior (Elliot, 1999). The most influential approach to the study of achievement motivation in contemporary literature has been the achievement goal approach. Dweck (1986) and others (Nicholls, 1984; Ames, 1984; Maehr, 1984) originated the achievement goals approach. Within this tradition, achievement goals are defined as the purpose of task engagement and are posited to create a framework for how individuals interpret and experience achievement settings (Elliot, 1999). Most theorists within this tradition have delineated two distinct types of goals: mastery and performance. These goals vary as a function of how competence is defined.

Ames (1992) reported that these two goals represent distinct conceptions of success and different reasons for engaging in achievement-related activities. They also involve disparate ways of thinking about oneself, one's task, and task outcomes. Ames (1992) provided detailed descriptions of these two contrasting achievement goals. She noted that mastery goals orient individuals toward developing new skills, trying to understand their work, improving their level of competence, or achieving a sense of mastery based on self-referenced standards. Central to a mastery goal is an attentional focus on the intrinsic value of learning and a belief that effort and performance outcomes covary. Ames (1992) observed that mastery goals have been linked with several variables that promote positive achievement activity. These include adaptive attributional beliefs regarding effort and success, preference for challenging work, an intrinsic interest in learning, positive attitudes toward learning, time commitment to learning, task persistence in the face of difficulty, and self-regulatory study strategies (Ames & Archer, 1988; Butler, 1987; Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985; Nolen & Haladyna, 1990; Stipek & Kowalski, 1989).

In contrast to mastery goals, Ames (1992) described performance goals as orienting one to focus on one's own ability and self-worth. Furthermore, ability is thought to be demonstrated by doing better than others, surpassing normative-based standards, or by achieving success with little effort. Public recognition is an especially important factor to a performance orientation and thus, learning in itself is viewed only as a means to reach a desired goal (e.g., normatively defined success). When one adopts a performance goal, effort expenditure can become a "double edged sword" and threaten self-concept when trying hard does not lead to success (Covington & Omelich, 1979). Ames (1992) noted that performance goals have been linked with avoidance of challenge seeking, negative affect following failure, positive affect following success with little effort, and use of superficial or short-term learning strategies (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott and Dweck, 1988; Jagacinski & Nicholls, 1984, 1987; Meece et al., 1988). Thus, the conceptual importance and utility of the mastery goal versus performance goal dichotomy has been well documented in the literature.

Elliot and Church (1997) reported that most achievement goal theorists conceptualize both performance and mastery goals as "approach" forms of motivation. The authors noted that this unidimensional focus on approach motivation neglects classical achievement motivation research (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; Murray, 1938) which emphasized that behavior in achievement settings may be oriented toward the attainment of success, as well as the avoidance of failure. Elliot (1999) explained that approach and avoidance motivation differ as a

function of valence: approach motivation instigates behavior via a positive or desirable event or possibility, whereas avoidance motivation instigates behavior via a negative or undesirable event or possibility. Elliot and colleagues (Elliott, 1997; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) have sought to address the aforementioned "unidimensional" shortcoming by developing a hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation which integrates central constructs from the classical "achievement motive approach" (McClelland et al., 1953; Murray, 1938) and the more contemporary "achievement goal approach" (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). Elliot and McGregor (1999) noted that:

> In this model, achievement motives (need for achievement and fear of failure) are construed as general, higher order motivational tendencies that energize individuals and orient them toward positive or negative possibilities. Achievement goals are construed as more concrete midlevel cognitive representations that direct individuals toward specific end states. Three types of achievement goals are posited: a performance-approach goal (focused on the attainment of competence relative to others), a performance-avoidance goal (focused on the avoidance of incompetence relative to others), and a mastery goal (focused on the development of competence or task mastery). Achievement motives are viewed as antecedents of achievement goal adoption, and these goals, in turn, are construed as direct predictors of achievement-relevant outcomes. (p. 628)

Thus, in the aforementioned trichotomous goal framework, the conventional performance goal construct is partitioned into separate approach and avoidance orientations. Elliot, McGregor, and Gable (1999) explained that the three independent achievement goals in the hierarchical model (i.e., mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance) were hypothesized to lead to unique patterns of achievement-relevant processes and outcomes. Elliot and colleagues (Elliott, 1997; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996), as well as other researchers (Middleton & Midgely, 1997; Midgely, Kaplan, Middleton, Maehr, Urdan, Anderman, Hicks-Anderman, & Roeser, 1998; Skalvik, 1997), have marshaled much evidence for the conceptual significance and utility of the trichotomous achievement goal framework.

Elliot (1999) reviewed the outcomes research incorporating the trichotomous goal framework and observed that the different goals have been linked to distinct predictive profiles as hypothesized. Mastery goals have been linked to a variety of positive processes and outcomes including challenge construals, absorption during task engagement, effort while studying, persistence while studying, self-determination while studying, challenge-related affect while studying, self-regulated learning, absorption in study material, willingness to seek help with school work, deep processing of information, long-term retention of information, and intrinsic motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz , 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999). Performance-approach goals have shown to be related to positive and a negative processes and outcomes. Positive consequences include challenge construals, higher levels of aspiration, absorption during task engagement, challenge-related affect while studying, effort while studying, persistence while studying, calmness during evaluation due to adequate preparation, high performance outcomes, and intrinsic motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz , 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999; Middleton & Midgely, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997); whereas negative consequences include test anxiety (emotionality only) during evaluation, shallow processing of information, and an unwillingness to seek help with school work (Elliot et al., 1999; Middleton & Midgely, 1997). Performance-avoidance goals have been linked to a host of negative processes and outcomes including threat construal, low absorption during task engagement, low self-determination while studying, threat-related affect while studying, distraction while studying, disorganized studying, less self-regulated learning,

procrastination, an unwillingness to seek help with schoolwork, shallow processing of information, wanting to escape evaluation, anxiety prior to evaluation, anxiety (worry and emotionality) during evaluation, poor retention of information, poor performance, and reduced intrinsic motivation (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999; Middleton & Midgely, 1997; Skaalvik, 1997).

Newman (1998) asserted that, at any one time in an achievement-related setting, learning and performance goals can coexist. Furthermore, he observed that factors influencing one's choice of achievement goals have generally been considered in one of two ways: personal (i.e., trait-like characteristics of the student) and contextual (i.e., embedded in the cues and structure of the classroom). Research regarding implicit assumptions about the nature of intelligence (Dweck & Legget, 1988) and one's achievement motives (Elliott, 1994, 1997; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996) are characteristic of the "personal" variables thought to influence one's adoption of achievement goals. Ames (1992) reviewed research on "contextual" variables (i.e., classroom characteristics) which influence the salience and adoption of achievement goals. Specifically, she described several instructional practices related to student evaluation and recognition (e.g., private versus public), learning tasks (e.g., meaningfulness), and student-teacher authority relations (e.g., student autonomy) which can significantly influence the salience of learning and performance goals. Ames (1992), as well as Newman (1998), noted that research has consistently supported the academic benefits (e.g., student willingness to put forth effort, active task engagement) of learning-oriented (versus performance-oriented) classrooms.

Newman (1998) discussed the importance of the "fit" between contextual goals and personal goals. He presented evidence indicating that contextual and personal goals can interact in beneficial, as well as deleterious, ways in regards to students' help seeking behaviors. His research suggested that when both contextual and personal goals emphasize performance, students' reluctance to seek help is reinforced. However, when students with relatively strong performance goals are placed in a learning goal context (i.e., one that stresses learning and task mastery), it appears that their adaptive help-seeking is facilitated. Urdan, Midgley, and Anderman (1998) have also explored the effects of classroom goal structures on students' use of academic self-handicapping strategies (e.g., putting off school work until the last minute, purposefully withholding academic effort). These strategies allow students to attribute substandard work to causes other than "lack of ability." Urdan et al. (1998) reported that students' use of self-handicapping strategies was positively related to their perceptions of a contextual emphasis on ability (i.e., performance) goals and teacher use of instructional strategies that made these goals salient. Midgely, Arunkumar, and Urdan (1996) also noted the relationship between academic self-handicapping and goals to demonstrate one's competence relative to others.

Dai, Moon, and Feldhusen (1998) discussed the importance of goal theories in understanding the achievement motivation of gifted students. The authors asserted that giftedness itself denotes socially valued attributes and that this social labeling has an inherent impact, which is both evaluative and reinforcing, on gifted students' self perceptions and self-beliefs. As noted above, these "personal" variables can be important determinants of achievement goal pursuit. Regarding gifted students, Mueller and Dweck (1998) noted that labeling children as gifted and/or talented represents a form of "intelligence praise," which may predispose some to adopt performance goals rather than mastery goals. Although research in this area is lacking, the authors suggested the possibility that some students may become overly concerned with justifying the "gifted" label via academic success (e.g., high grades, recognition) and less concerned with seeking challenging tasks that might enhance their skills. Dai et al. (1998) reviewed related research on the effects of goal conditions (i.e., contextual characteristics) and goal orientations (i.e., self-reported goals) on achievement-related processes

and outcomes. In regard to goal conditions, the authors noted that the limited research with gifted students suggests an advantage of learning goal structures (task-involving) over performance goal structures (ego-involving) for gifted and/or academically talented (i.e., G/AT) students. Thus, these population-specific findings are generally similar to those reported by Ames (1992). However, research regarding G/AT students' goal orientations is less well developed and unclear. Dai et al. (1998) reported a variety of inconsistent findings and noted that these are likely due to different theoretical foci, methodologies, and operationalizations of "giftedness."

Dai et al. (1998) discussed several issues for future research regarding motivation and gifted students. These included a need for more definitive research assessing the relations among instruction, motivation, and learning, as well as more research exploring "within-group" variability among gifted students. Research assessing the relations among instruction, motivation, and learning in gifted education is posited to aid in understanding the motivational effects of different instructional approaches . Clinkenbeard (1996) also discussed the importance of research in this area. She noted that information regarding the effects of instruction on the motivation of gifted students is important for decision-making in the classroom and determining if programs are meeting motivation-related goals (e.g., developing love of learning, increasing academic risk-taking). Examining individual differences "within" gifted populations is posited to aid in assessing motivational factors associated with maximal talent development, as well as factors related to underachievement. McNabb (1997) also discussed the value of conceptualizing gifted students' underachievement in terms of motivational issues and proposed that achievement goal theories are of great utility in assessing self-defeating and self-handicapping behaviors exhibited by some gifted underachievers. Seeley (1993) agreed and noted that the linkages between achievement goals, learning, and motivation are clear and form the basis for understanding the reasons for underachievement in gifted students.

In an attempt to address components of the aforementioned research agendas, the present study aimed to assess if teachers of G/AT students utilized instructional practices thought to foster task-focused environments more often than they utilized practices thought to foster performance-focused environments . As much research (Ames, 1992; Newman, 1998; Urdan et al., 1998) has noted the benefits of task-focused versus performance-focused instruction, assessing the degree to which teachers of G/AT students differentially employ these practices was deemed an important research endeavor. The present study also aimed to assess if teachers perceived "high achieving" and "low achieving" G/AT students to differ in their pursuit of personal achievement goals. Literature incorporating the trichotomous goal framework (Elliott, 1997; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot et al., 1999; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996, Elliot & McGregor, 1999, Middleton & Midgely, 1997; Midgley et al. 1998 Skalvik, 1997) has differentially linked the pursuit of various achievement goals (i.e., task/mastery, performance-approach, performance-avoidance) to a variety of achievement-related correlates. Assessing perceived differences in achievement goal pursuit among "high achieving" and "low achieving" G/AT students may promote a better understanding of factors associated with maximal talent development and underachievement. Thus, the present study addressed the following questions: (a) Do teachers of G/AT students utilize task-focused instructional practices more often than performance-focused instructional practices?, (b) Do teachers of G/AT students perceive differential achievement goal pursuit (i.e., task, performance-approach, performance-avoidance) between "high achieving" versus "low achieving" G/AT students?, and (c) Do teachers of G/AT students perceive within-group differences in goal pursuit for "high achieving" and "low achieving" G/AT students?

Method

Participants

Participants were forty-nine teachers of G/AT students at the elementary grade levels. Forty-four were female, 3 were male, and 2 failed to indicate their gender. The sample of teachers had an average of 16 (SD = 8) years of general teaching experience with an average of 7 (SD = 5) years experience with G/AT students. Most teachers reported current teaching experience with G/AT students at multiple grade levels ($1^{st} - 6^{th}$). Teachers reported having current instructional experiences with an average of 25 (SD = 20) G/AT students.

Measures

Approaches to Teaching and Learning. The "Approaches to Teaching and Learning" scale from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS; Midgley et al., 1997) was used to assess teachers' use of task-focused and performance-focused instruction. The nine items of this scale represent task-focused (4 items) and performance-focused (5 items) approaches to teaching. Teachers were asked to rate how often they employed each of the nine instructional practices using a 5-point scale (1 = never; 5 = always). Responses to scale items were averaged to obtain index scores. Midgley et al. (1997) provide evidence regarding the internal consistency of the task-focused and performance-focused scales (alpha = .75 and .79, respectively). Regarding the present study, similar results were noted for the performance-focused scale (alpha = .77), however results for the task-focused scale were somewhat lower (alpha = .50).

Personal Goal Orientation. The "Personal Goal Orientation" scale (PALS; Midgley et al., 1997) was used to assess perceived differences in students' achievement goal pursuit. The 17 items of this scale are intended for student response and represent task (5 items), performance-approach (6 items), and performance-avoidance (6 items) achievement goals. These scales were modified in the present study so that teachers rated the lowest achieving and highest achieving G/AT with which they had worked with during the current academic year. Teachers were instructed to think of these two students and indicate how often they had observed each of them to act in accordance with the 17 scale items (i.e., student-based statements). Again, a 5-point scale was used (1 = never; 5 = always) and responses to scale items were averaged to obtain index scores (task, performance-approach, performance-avoidance). Thus, ratings reflect teacher perceptions of students' achievement goals rather than actual student endorsement.

Procedure

The two instruments, cover letter, and postage-paid return envelope were sent to approximately 160 elementary schools that provided educational services for G/AT in West-Central Indiana. Materials were addressed to "Teachers of Gifted and/or Academically Talented Students" at each school. Thirty-one percent of the surveys were returned.

Results

A related-measures t-test was conducted to assess differences in teachers' self-reported use of task-focused versus performance-focused instructional practices. Results indicated that teachers reported using task-focused practices ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .43$) significantly more often than performance-focused practices ($M = 2.37$, $SD = .69$), $t(46) = 16.91$, $p < .001$.

Three dependent t-tests were conducted to assess perceived achievement goal differences between high achieving and low achieving G/AT students. A Bonferroni inequality ($\alpha / 3 = .017$) was used to control Type I error due to correlated measures within groups. Results indicated teachers perceived significantly higher levels of task goals among high achieving G/AT students ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .55$) as compared to the low achieving G/AT students

($M = 2.86$, $SD = .76$), $t(46) = 10.56$, $p < .001$. Teachers also perceived significantly higher levels of performance-approach goals among high achieving ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .90$) compared to low achieving ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .91$) G/AT students, $t(45) = 6.56$, $p < .001$. Perceptions regarding perceived performance-avoidance goals were not significantly different between the two groups, $t(45) = 2.09$, $p = .042$.

A repeated measures analysis using a multivariate approach (MANOVA) was conducted to assess perceived achievement goal differences within groups. Results indicated significant differences among perceived achievement goals within the high achieving group only, Pillais Trace = .66, $F(2,44) = 43.1$, $p < .001$. Three paired t-tests were conducted to assess differences in scores. Due to multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni inequality ($\alpha / 3 = .017$) was used to control Type I error. Results indicated that perceptions of task goals ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .55$) and performance-approach goals ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .90$) were rated significantly higher than perceptions of performance-avoidance goals ($M = 3.06$, $SD = .81$), $t(46) = 7.87$, $p < .001$ and $t(46) = 7.21$, $p < .001$, respectively. Thus, high achieving G/AT students were perceived to pursue task and performance-approach goals at significantly higher rates than performance-avoidance goals. Conversely, low achieving G/AT students were perceived to be undifferentiated in regards to achievement goal pursuit, Pillais Trace = .07, $F(2,44) = 1.55$, $p = .22$. Thus, teachers perceived no particular goal as salient within this group.

Discussion

Results of the current study indicated that teachers of G/AT students reported the use of task-focused instructional practices significantly more often than performance-focused practices. This is a promising finding for two reasons. First, research (Ames, 1992; Newman, 1998; Urdan et al., 1998) has indicated a variety of benefits related to the use of task-focused (i.e., an emphasis on effort, mastery, and improvement) instructional practices as opposed to performance-focused (i.e., an emphasis on relative ability and competition practices) practices. These advantages (e.g., student willingness to put forth effort, active task engagement) are especially important for gifted education programs which seek to address academic and motivation-related goals (e.g., fostering love of learning, increasing academic risk-taking) as discussed by Clinkenbeard (1996). Secondly, recent research (Urdan et al., 1998) has suggested that task-oriented contexts can aid students having a strong performance orientation to overcome personal tendencies that stress grades and looking smart and foster their willingness to seek help when needed. As noted earlier (Mueller & Dweck, 1998), this may be especially important for some G/AT students who might adopt performance goals in an attempt to "justify" or "validate" their giftedness.

Teachers perceived significantly higher levels of task (or mastery) goals among high achieving G/AT students as compared to low achieving G/AT students. Thus, consistent with trends in existing research, perceived task goal pursuit was associated with an advantageous correlate in the present study (i.e., identification as a high achieving G/AT student). Pursuit of task goals has been linked with a variety of positive correlates in previous research (Ames, 1992; Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliott and Dweck, 1988; Elliot & Harackiewicz , 1996; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999). Although not explored in this study, it may be that these high achieving G/AT students possess some of these same qualities (e.g., intrinsic motivation, persistence, preference for challenge) which foster their high achievement. Teachers also perceived significantly higher levels of performance-approach goals among high achieving compared to low achieving G/AT students. This finding is also consistent with trends in recent literature. Pursuit of performance-approach goals has been positively associated with graded performance and achievement, as well as factors such as persistence and effort (Elliot &

Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999; Skaalvik, 1997). Teacher perceptions regarding perceived performance-avoidance goal pursuit were not significantly different between the two groups. Thus, the present study did not find the expected relationship between performance-avoidance goals and problematic academic performance (i.e., identification as a low achiever) suggested in previous research (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Elliot et al., 1999; Skaalvik, 1997). However, it may be that the relationship between performance-avoidance goals and academic performance does not apply to G/AT students. The methodology used in the present study may also be responsible for the lack of significant findings for performance-avoidance goals. More rigorous research involving G/AT students' self-reported goal pursuit is needed to assess the generalizability of this relationship.

Among the high achieving G/AT students, teachers perceived significant differences in these students' relative goal pursuit. These high achieving G/AT students were perceived to pursue task and performance-approach goals at significantly higher rates than performance-avoidance goals. Again, mastery and performance-approach goals have been associated with a variety of positive achievement-related processes and outcomes (e.g., intrinsic motivation and graded performance, respectively) which may aid our understanding of optimal talent development in G/AT students. Conversely, low achieving G/AT students were perceived to be undifferentiated in regards to goal pursuit. In regards to performance-related goals in general, this finding may be better understood in light of prior research suggesting that grades and other indicators of academic success have little meaning or importance for gifted underachievers (Emerick, 1992).

In summary, as more research regarding the effects of instruction on motivation of G/AT students is recommended, the use of existing instruments with this population needs to be further explored and evaluated. The utility of goal theories in examining underachievement among G/AT students is also an area in much need of empirical investigation. The present study provided a preliminary assessment of the instructional orientation of some teachers of G/AT students using the PALS "Approaches to Teaching and Learning" scales. The present study also explored the use, albeit modified, of an existing instrument in the assessment of "within group" differences among G/AT students as perceived by their teachers. In regard to students' pursuit of different achievement goals, the differences reported in the present study are "perceived" differences as rated by teachers and not based on student responses to the PALS "Personal Goal Orientation" scales. Thus, findings must be interpreted cautiously due to the lack of research assessing "accuracy" of goal orientation estimates made by teachers.

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